JORGE EDUARDO EIELSON AND SOUND POETRY

By Luis Alvarado

The work of Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1924-2006) in the fields of visual and sound poetry has been conspicuously absent from the international anthologies pertaining to these disciplines. One of the reasons for this absence may have to do with the limited circulation of this side of his broad and complex output as a poet and visual artist. Nevertheless, in the past few years this aspect of his work has become better known, and can now be seen, in its own right, as a valuable contribution to the development of experimental poetry.

Jorge Eduardo Eielson was born in Peru and had an outstanding debut in the world of poetry: at the age of twenty, he gathered immediate recognition and was greeted with many awards. At the end of the 1940s, he traveled to France after winning a scholarship, and then moved to Italy, initiating an exile from his country, to which he would only return on rare occasions. In Europe he developed as a visual artist, sculptor, painter, and as the creator of works that were inspired by pre-Hispanic art as well as the Peruvian coast desert landscape. Eielson produced not only paintings and objects, but also performances, happenings, musical compositions and pieces of conceptual art. The development of what he called his "written poetry" is also traversed by his concerns in the field of visual arts, which is the reason why both visual and vocal poetry had a role to play in his complex artistic universe, as part of the expansion of his concept of poetry.

Jorge Eduardo Eielson's experiments in vocal poetry, named "vocal structures" or "audiopaintings", were all based on combinatorial analysis and permutations. To understand them, we must go back to his book Tema y variaciones [Theme and Variations] (1950), where his interest in the combinatorial analysis of words is present. This concern would resurface much later, in his novel El cuerpo de Giulia-no [The Body of Giulia-no] (1972).

In several interviews, the poet stated that towards the end of the 1960s he had completed a cycle in his poetry and painting and that he needed to branch out to other dimensions, towards total activity, which he called three-dimensional poetry. This kind of output was possible once he found a creative device that he called "musical matrix".

This matrix was to be found in two currents of the postwar musical avant-garde: integral serialism and the indeterminacy of John Cage. From serialism, Eielson takes the idea of serial composition. In serialism, composition is based on the organization of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale, without there being a tonal principle or a dominant note. That is to say, the idea of a hierarchy of notes is abandoned, which opens the possibility of a freer system of relations between sounds. This implies a form of composition based on mathematical principles, in numerical operations. From this also derives the origin of computer music, or computer-generated music in the 1950s, works performed and calculated with computational algorithms.

Some contemporary poets have used serial resources to propose innovative systems of creation: such is the case, for example, of members of the well-known Brazilian concretism movement. But it is perhaps the work Inger, Permutaciones (1971) by Catalan author Juan Eduardo Cirlot (who was also a composer), that crystallized a form of vocal phonetic poetry based on this type of structural device. Cirlot had been exploring permutations since 1954. The American Brion Gysin would be one of the first to compose poems using computers, creating rules for the combination of words that were read and processed electronically, thereby opening a new universe for sound poetry. A good example of this is his audio poem I Am That I Am (1960).

Towards the end of the 1960s, Eielson began a creative period where performances took center stage. There is an important musical composition, Concierto por la paz [Peace Concert] (1972), for flute, drums and sheets of paper, which was performed at the Venice Biennale and Documenta in Kassel. In this performance the poet gives the audience a blank page with the instruction: "Accompany the musicians by shaking this sheet of paper." After shaking it to the rhythm of the drums and flutes, the sheet was torn and thrown away. The paper became a vehicle for collective creation, a means for the public to participate in the performance of a musical work. Concierto por la paz would be the radicalization of a previous work, Papel [Paper] (1960), which included a series of sheets of paper carrying variants of the same self-referential description: "paper with 4 words", "perforated paper", "folded and perforated paper", etc., culminating with the destruction of these sheets of paper. A key work of Eielson's development in the field of conceptualism is Esculturas subterráneas [Underground Sculptures], which consists of a series of imagined sculptures that are buried in different cities of the world. Two of these sculptures are premonitory of Eielson's path to vocal poetry and reveal his obsessions that are installed in utopian domains. The so-called Escultura horripilante [Horrifying Sculpture] (1967) consists of, among other elements: "a compound based on synthetic medullary liquid used as an electronic (field) and placed inside the sculpture as vital fluid", "the head of a talking doll" and "15000 meters of recorded tape with the most important poetic texts of all time, including the Bible." Describing aspects of its functioning, the poet writes: "the creature will explode, with frightful results, on the same day that it finishes reciting all the poems recorded on the magnetic tape."

The Escultura con voz comprimida [Sculpture with Compressed Voice] (1968) is described as "A cylinder 99 meters long, 11 meters in diameter, covered with miroleg [a synthetic material that can function as a mirror]. The author's voice as well as Stockhausen's Song of the Youths, have been hermetically sealed inside, together with a handful of IKB [International Klein Blue]." Regarding the operation of this work, the poet specifies the following: "The cylinder, on whose base 200 microcomputers are installed, is placed obliquely 44 meters underground, with an inclination of 75 degrees towards the East. At programmed intervals, the computerized system will transform the recitative voice into blue light, or inner light."

The transformation into light that Eielson imagines prefigures his new poetic explorations; it suggests a kind of transmutation of the poem.

From 1972 to 1977, Jorge Eduardo Eielson made inquiries into vocal poetry or, as he called them, "verbal structures" or "audiopaintings". He describes his Concierto para trapos [Concerto for rags], a work that has been lost: "The repetition of certain words recorded on magnetic tape produces in

those who hear them true visual hallucinations, which is why I also define these experiences as audiopaintings, because of the perfect synesthetic effect." (1)

In another interview he points out: "When you write you don't have a basic idea, you don't know what you are going to write (you only have a sensation, an experience, anything can trigger a poem), in the same way, when the poem was coming, I used to take a tape recorder and I would start to recite. I made different versions, I made several variations until I found what I wanted, and it was not necessarily the image that predominated, as it can happen with a written poem, but above all what is particularly oral, the phoneme, the syllable, the fractured word, then there is nothing but rhythms, I used syllables, vowels and sometimes even shouting, laughter, singing. The word dissolves like that." (2)

The artist also suggested the idea that these verbal structures were aided by calculations made with computers: "These are texts read by me –I do not know whether to call them poems– that have been processed by experts, who feed computers with the material I give them. I read the results in the conditions that I think are appropriate. The reading is unique and gets recorded." (3)

"In these texts, more than the metaphorical image or any other kind of image, I am interested above all in the structure of the poem. A brief computer work done a few years ago gave me such fascinating and practically untranslatable results in any language that every image has since lost to me its signifying dimension. Staying only with the combinatory schemes, with the measures of the poem, with its rhythms, with its remote mathematical origin, I ended up inventing a certain type of sound, vocal and statistical poetry whose dramatic (for me) nakedness has nothing to envy to the coldness of numbers. Since reality itself –however bloody it is– is nothing but a number." (4)

When asked about the process of these pieces, Eielson describes one of them:

"One of the working methods can be the following: at one point I was very interested in the problem of eroticism and, in a moment of extreme sincerity, I began to write down all the parts of the body that could interest me during sexual intercourse, until I arrived at a very severe list, with some repetitions. With this very simple, but very heartfelt list, the machine made a number of combinations that, curiously, at the time of the first reading, almost corresponded to what could have been the amorous act idealized by me. The result was very concrete, very close, or almost equal to what I would have done with those same words and with the act. It is curious to see how a reality as concrete as the machine, another as concrete as the author performing the sexual act and another as abstract as the author imagining the act and writing it, coincided. The result is read only once, because at that moment I am almost in an amorous trance." (5)

Of these experiments carried out over a period of five years, which were presented at the Museum of Modern Art in Caracas in 1977, only one remains, and its author presented it on several public and private occasions, both in its recorded form as well as in live performances. It is the piece called Colores [Colors], which is based on the repetition of words that name colors: red, yellow, green, blue. And each word has a different tonality. Colores is derived from the permutation of four word-tones. This work adds an element already present in Eielson's book of visual poems Canto visible [Visible Chant] (1960), which is related to synesthesia, an alteration in perception by which we hear images, or see sounds.

The idea of colored listening is long-standing and one of its strongest formulations can be found in Kandinsky's Concerning the spiritual in art, where the artist attributes internal sounds to colors. This classic book for the development of non-figurative or abstract art, also suggests some elements that anticipate the development of sound poetry, as it points out that just as there is a pure painting, based on colors, there can also be a poetry of pure sounds. Years later Hugo Ball would put this idea into practice with his verses without words, poems of pure sounds that initiate a tradition of vocal phonetic poetry. The arrival of technology, the microphone and recorders, made it possible for what is known as phonetic poetry to intersect with the explorations of concrete and electronic music. In this way, sound poetry was born in France, in the 1950s, as a phenomenon tied to the voice of the poet amplified and manipulated by these new technologies.

The idea of audiopaintings undoubtedly resonates with the audiopoems of Henri Chopin, the father of sound poetry. And that is the path that Eielson has explored, but from the point of view of his own musical matrix, as he called his creative process, in which chance and serial construction converge, as well as orality and multiple ways of producing combinations of words.

"I have opted for verbal structures, nebulae of words capable of revealing their most secret meaning only in certain circumstances. My job is to provoke those circumstances." (6)

What Jorge Eduardo Eielson calls audiopainting, or verbal and vocal structures is almost like a way to vaporize the poem, to turn it into auditory-plastic matter, from the oral cavity to an unknown place, as he would say, "to transform the recitative voice into blue light, or interior light."

(1) In "La creación como totalidad", Interview granted to Roland Forgues (1985). Included in Ceremonia comentada 1946-2005, textos sobre arte, estética y cultura/ Jorge Eduardo Eielson/Edición de Luis Rebaza IFEA/MALI/CONGRESO DEL PERU, 2010, Lima, p 234.

(2) In "Entrevista a Jorge Eduardo Eielson", by Antonio Cisneros and Rafael Vargas (1985). Included in Ceremonia comentada 1946-2005, textos sobre arte, estética y cultura/ Jorge Eduardo Eielson/Edición de Luis Rebaza IFEA/MALI/CONGRESO DEL PERU, 2010, Lima, p 329.

(3) In "Eielson, después del silencio", interview with Luis Freire (1977). Included in Ceremonia comentada 1946-2005, textos sobre arte, estética y cultura/ Jorge Eduardo Eielson/Edición de Luis Rebaza IFEA/MALI/CONGRESO DEL PERU, 2010, Lima, p 159.

(4) Correspondence with Juan Acha (c 1977). Included in Ceremonia comentada 1946-2005, textos sobre arte, estética y cultura/ Jorge Eduardo Eielson/Edición de Luis Rebaza IFEA/MALI/CONGRESO DEL PERU, Lima, p 164.

(5) 1977 op. cit.

(6) c1977 op. cit.